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Developing Occupational Identity in Refugee Youth

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Introduction

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, a refugee is defined as an individual who is forced to leave their country due to persecution, war, or religious violence (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2018). The most common countries for refugees to flee from include Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan. According to the United Nations, there are approximately 25.4 million refugees in the world, which is the largest number of refugees in history (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2018). In Pennsylvania specifically, there are approximately 837,159 refugees making up six percent of the state's population (American Immigrant Council, 2017). With the increasing number of refugees worldwide, it is difficult for refugees to find new, secure, safe countries to call "home."

Once refugees find a safe country, they face numerous challenges adjusting to the country's language, culture and customs (Lee, 2008). Unfortunately, the challenges refugees face escalate for vulnerable populations, particularly youth who are refugees (Park, 2015). This paper discusses the challenges these youth face adjusting to the United States, as well as the benefit of providing health and educational activities, which can support these youth to overcome these challenges. In order to demonstrate the potential impact of these supports, this paper highlights the experiences of ten youth who are refugees that attended an Afterschool Club in Pittsburgh that implemented health and educational activities in the spring of 2019.

Challenges that Youth that are Refugees Face

Youth who are refugees face many difficulties adjusting to the United States (Lee, 2008). These challenges can be broadly organized into two contextual categories; the youth's home and community environment and their school environment. Difficulties in their home and community environment can include encountering different languages, customs, and cultures. These differences in customs and culture can include new foods, new ways to greet other people, or new games to play (Riggs, 2006). Other challenges these youth face in their home and community environments include adjusting to a new home which may include living in an apartment or house for the first time, and adjusting to a new community with new places such a library or playground (Rigg, 2006).

Within their school environment, these youth may experience difficulties meeting new friends and teachers (Lee, 2008). With new school friends in new school contexts, bullying may become an issue. According to a research study by Maynard and colleagues, youth who are refugees are more likely to experience bullying than native born Americans. This is a serious issue because bullying can lead to interpersonal, socioemotional, and substance abuse problems (Maynard et al., 2016). In addition to bullying, these youth are challenged to learn difficult subjects such as science, math and social studies in a new language. Adjusting to a new school environment requires these youth to learn the cultural nuances of learning in an American classroom, receiving food in the lunch line and negotiating the social scene of the school lunchroom, and connecting with peers or exploring their interests through new clubs (Lee, 2008).

Solution: Health and Educational Activities

Considering the variety and intensity of the challenges that these youth face, multiple non-profit organizations have been working together to propose solutions to overcome these challenges. Although there are various approaches to address these challenges, one effective solution is health and educational activities (Riggs, 2006). Health and educational activities establish an enriching environment for youth who are refugees by providing academic support and fun and creative activities that also address skill development (Lee, 2008). Some of the skills these type of activities work on include self-identity, love, and teamwork. From an occupational therapy perspective, health and education activities can target skills important for the development of key occupational roles of youth including being a friend, a family member and a student (Riggs, 2006).

Health and educational activities can produce numerous benefits for youth who are refugees. Programs with these types of activities often connect to students more effectively than schools can and provide a fun and supportive environment that gives youth who are refugees a place to express themselves (Bayzk et al., 2009). Health and educational activities can also improve social development and behavior by giving these youth a space to talk about their feelings (Bayzk et al., 2009). Finally, these types of

activities are effective because they bridge academic and cultural barriers as well as help these youth identify themselves in their new country (Diversi, 2004).

Afterschool Club

In the spring of 2019, I integrated health and educational activities into an Afterschool Club for youth who are refugees. The Afterschool Club was established through a collaboration between the Jewish Family and Community Services (JFCS) and the Alliance for Refugee Youth Support and Education (ARYSE) in Pittsburgh. JFCS is a social service agency that provides resettlement to refugees as well as encourages self-sufficiency for refugees in the community (JFCS, 2019). ARYSE is an organization that dedicates their time to help youth who are refugees become engaged and confident members of the community (ARYSE, 2019). Their goal for their joint Afterschool Club is to provide a safe and productive space for youth to foster friendship, creativity, acceptance, leadership skills and academic growth (ARYSE, 2019).

Afterschool Club Demographics

In the club, I worked with ten youth; eight girls and two boys. These youth were between age eight and eleven and were in 3rd through 5th grade. The participants were originally from countries including Syria, Congo, Tanzania and Afghanistan. The youth spoke either Swahili or Arabic as their first languages and all were in the process of learning English.

Afterschool Club Schedule and Themes

All Afterschool Club sessions began with homework, emphasizing the youth's role as a student. After homework the kids participated in fun and creative activities that emphasized their role as a family member and friend. These fun and creative activities all focused on themes toward skill development. The three themed sessions of focus for this paper include teamwork, expressing love, and self-identity. The themed parts of the sessions began with an introduction of the theme, an activity, a sharing circle, a group discussion, and finally learning slips. The structure of each session was grounded in a seven step group process defined by Cole (Cole, 2018). Learning slips were my way to promote long term learning for the youth throughout the sessions. They included two questions. The first question was "what did you learn

today?” and the second question was “how can you apply this into your life?” These learning slips were collected after each session and will be returned to the participants at the end of the program to serve as a reminder of what they had learned in the club.

Self-Identity Session

The first session I led was the self-identity session. The goals for the youth in this session included defining self-identity, articulating and expressing one’s unique self-identity, and finally, appreciating another person’s identity.

To reach these goals, the activity I created for this session was making Self-Identify Bags. For this activity, each kid received a brown paper bag as well as a worksheet with questions that encouraged the kids to draw or write something about themselves. The questions focused on the youth’s identity (favorite music or favorite food) and the youth’s occupations (favorite subject in school or their favorite activity to play with their friends).

After the kids created the bags, they participated in a sharing circle where I encouraged each kid to share one thing that they included on their bag. I found it interesting that the kids shared similar interests to native born American kids. Their favorite music to listen to was Jojo Siwa and they enjoyed playing typical American games such as Tag and Duck Duck Goose. As well as having similar interests to native born American peers, they also shared interests specific to their native-born country. The Congolese kids shared that they enjoyed playing the “Stone Game” which includes throwing small stones in the air, quickly touching the ground, and then trying to catch the stone before it hits the ground; while the Afghani kids shared that they enjoyed playing with their version of fortune tellers.

After our sharing circle, we all participated in a group discussion that centered around learning to accept and appreciate differences. Finally, the kids completed learning slips about the session. The general theme of the learning slips was identifying that everyone has their own unique identity.

Expressing Love Session

The next session I led was titled “expressing love”. The goals for the youth in this session included learning about expressing love, learning who we can love, and learning how we can show our love to someone else.

To reach these goals, the activity I created for this session was making Valentine’s Day Cards. For this activity, I told each kid to make a card for one person that they loved and to write one reason why they loved them.

For the sharing part of the session, I encouraged each kid to share what they wrote on their card. Each of the kids wrote these cards to different people including parents, teachers and siblings. One of the most meaningful cards was a card that a kid wrote to his teacher saying that “she meant the world to him.” The young boy shared his struggles of coming to the United States and shared that his teacher has helped him with these struggles. I thought this card was important because it highlights how powerful a positive adult relationship can be for youth adjusting to a new country.

For the group discussion, I emphasized who we can love in our community including friends, parents, teachers etc. I wanted to emphasize to the youth that they live in a supportive community of people that love them and can help them adjust to the challenges they are facing. In their learning slips, I challenged the kids to come up with new ways to show their love to people in the community. They came up with ideas like spending time with people they love or opening the door for them.

Teamwork Session

The final session I led was focused on teamwork. The goals for the youth in this session included learning how to work as a team, and learning and practicing teamwork strategies such as communication and leadership.

I planned two different activities for this session so the kids could reach these goals. The first activity was the Human Knot, where all the kids stood in a circle and held hands with two different people across from them (“Human Knot,” 2019). The goal of the activity was to untangle the “human knot” by returning to the original circle without letting go of anyone’s hands (“Human Knot,” 2019). This activity required intense teamwork and offered the youth in each “knot” to lead, listen, offer strategies and

collaborate. My second activity was to create a banner for the youth at the Open Door Mission's Afterschool Program. Fortunately, the Open Door Mission allows us to use their afterschool space for our program, so I thought this banner would be a great way to thank them. I gave each kid a puzzle piece and encouraged them to write information about themselves or phrases such as "thank you" or "I can't wait to meet you." At the end of the session, I encouraged all the kids to put the puzzle pieces together to create one banner.

The sharing portion of the session included meeting the youth from the Open Door Mission. This was important for developing the youth who are refugees' role as a friend because it challenged the youth to not only be friends with other refugees, but also native-born American kids. In order to encourage relationships between the youth, I asked all the kids sit in a circle and pose questions about one another. They carried out a very mature conversation in which the Open Door Mission youth asked questions to the refugee youth about what it is like coming to the United States. The youth who are refugees expressed that it has been difficult coming to the United States because it is hard to learn English and adjust to different customs. They said that they had to rely on other people in order to acclimate to the United States. This activity provided the youth who are refugees and the youth from Open Door Mission a rare opportunity for group cross cultural learning.

A group discussion followed the sharing circle that emphasized that different teamwork strategies such as communication and leadership are required to be a team member in different situations. I challenged the youth in their learning slips to determine different teamwork strategies needed at school for group work with their friends, compared to at home doing chores with their family.

Conclusion

To understand the challenges youth that are refugees face and the benefit of health and educational activities, I considered the youths' perspective of my sessions and the club in general. In a group circle, the youth reflected that the mentors in the club made them feel safe and happy. The youth also reported the club helped them adjust to their new environment by giving them a place to express themselves. They also reported how the club helped them understand their homework and gave them an opportunity to

practice English. Finally, they expressed they learned new skills in the club to help them in their roles as students, family members and friends.

After completing health and educational activities at the Afterschool Club and analyzing the youths' perspectives of them, I concluded that health and education activities can be an effective approach for these youth to overcome the challenges they face adjusting to the United States. Further, I recommend other community agencies serving youth who are refugees to consider integrating health and educational activities into the services and programs they currently offer. Students from other Duquesne University health science and liberal arts programs might also be trained to replicate my approach and use of health and educational activities to meet the needs of youth who are refugees.

Overall, this project was extremely effective not only for the youth who are refugees, but for myself, in helping me to learn numerous strategies to lead a group of people from a variety of cultures and languages. Lessons I learned include talking slower when communicating with English Language Learners, using a model of group interventions to provide consistent structure to group session plans and ensuring selected learning activities align with an individual's culture. The success of this project inspires me to work with youth who are refugees as an occupational therapist, in hopes of helping other youth identify their occupational identity and adjust to the challenges of immigrating to the United States.

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